



Making Sense

Materiality, Memory and Imagination in
Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* and *Lanny*

Nils Van den Keybus

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Promotor: prof. dr. Gunther Martens

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Abstract¹

While especially well-equipped to examine engagements between embodied readers and narrative texts, 4E narratology often overlooks the materiality of that narrative. Conversely, materialist scholars foreground textual materiality, but rarely consider the role of embodied readers to the extent of 4E narratology. Drawing on both theoretical currents, I attempt to bridge this gap to demonstrate the inseparability of text, materiality, and embodied readers.

Through close readings of Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* and *Lanny*, I illustrate the theoretical and methodological advantages of this approach. Employing language and layout in innovative ways, both novels excel at foregrounding the perceptual experiences of characters. More poetic than diegetic, they present difficulties for classical narratological approaches and thus opportunities for demonstrating the value of integrating materialist insights into 4E theory. The ways in which *Grief* and *Lanny* invite readers to imagine unfamiliar bodies, movements and perception can only fully be grasped by simultaneously accounting for textual and non-textual devices, such as language, layout or multimodal and synesthetic metaphors. In particular, I will examine perspective, mirroring effects, kinesthetic empathy, affordances, weird narrators, and unfamiliar perception.

I posit that readers *make sense* of narratives through sensory imagination, combining experiential traces with cues in various modalities to enact perceptual experiences. Thus, I argue that the interaction between readers and materially constituted narrative texts cannot so easily be dissected into verbal and material components. By using multimodal literary examples, I demonstrate that this distinction is artificial and that isolating modalities results in a reductionist account. Only by examining text and materiality simultaneously can we achieve a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which readers make sense of narrative.

Introduction

What causes readers to feel immersed in narratives? Why do we get a certain feeling when reading specific passages? 4E (embodied, embedded, extended and enacted) narratology seems to offer the most promising theoretical framework to answer such questions. While especially well-equipped to examine how embodied readers engage with textual narrative, it often overlooks the material constitution of that narrative. Conversely, materialist scholars foreground textual materiality, but rarely consider the role of embodied readers to the extent 4E narratology does. Drawing on both theoretical currents, I attempt to

¹ A proposal of this paper was accepted for the thematic section of the CLW issue on literature and materiality. As I'm submitting this version as my master's thesis, I made sure it was conform to the relevant guidelines, opting to revise this paper based on any feedback received within the framework of the master's theses, to then adapt it to the CLW guidelines.

bridge this gap to demonstrate the inseparability of text, materiality, and embodied readers. As such, I propose a theoretical framework that integrates three materialities of reading: materiality represented in the text, materiality of the text and material (embodied) readers. I insist that these must be considered together, as their joint effects exceed the sum of their parts.

While this paper will thus have a strong theoretical emphasis, I also want to “theorize *through* practice” [italics in original] (Eggert 2012, 17), to demonstrate the value of this theory. Taking materiality seriously from a 4E perspective leads to a better understanding of how readers make sense of narratives and accommodates texts that have traditionally been more challenging for narratological approaches, such as experimental or multimodal literature. To do this, I will examine two multimodal novels written by Max Porter, which resist classical narratological interpretations. While his work has received increasing public attention, reaching beyond reader audiences through impressive stage and film adaptations, scholarship on his work has remained limited.

Drawing on enactivist approaches, I retain perception as a central issue, at the basis of how readers phenomenologically experience narrative. Accordingly, I employ central 4E concepts such as sensory imagination, bodily resonance and experiential traces. I argue that the proposed theoretical framework leads to a more complete understanding of these concepts and the interplay of memory, materiality and imagination in meaning-making processes. Consequently, it illuminates reader imagination, immersion and experienced intensity.

I will start by unpacking the impressive work that 4E narratology has done for understanding the ways in which embodied readers relate to narrative. Illustrating the interdisciplinary tradition of 4E narratology, I follow Armstrong’s suggestion to triangulate the phenomenological side of reading with narrative theories and neuroscientific findings about embodied cognition (2019, 396). Particularly in reconnecting 4E narratology with its philosophical roots, I will argue that it needs to reconnect with the material commitments which were already present there.

Moving to what I believe 4E narratology needs, I then look at the ways in which materiality impacts narrative texts. Here, I depend on materialist accounts to demonstrate that narrative is inseparable from its material instantiation and to argue that, to truly get at a 4E account of narrative, the materiality of literature is unavoidable. The question that is addressed here first and foremost is how the physical form of text can impact narratives. Thankfully, I can depend on important research by Alison Gibbons (2012) and Marco Caracciolo (2023), who have already explored connecting cognitive and 4E narratology to the materiality of literature.

Further exploring these opportunities, I include insights from multimodality studies, for which materiality is, of course, inevitable. Because multimodal texts do not easily fit existing theoretical frameworks, multimodality studies developed new tools to deal with texts that reinstall the physicality and materiality of semiotic practices (Hallet 2009, 146; Stockwell 2002A, 10-11). As multimodal

literature raises new challenges for cognitive poetics, it also promises to reveal multimodal meaning-making strategies (Gibbons 2012, 6), which can help us to understand how embodied readers deal with materially constituted texts.

Integrating materialist insights in key 4E concepts, I then highlight the opportunities of addressing materiality in meaning-making processes. This is also where theory and practice meet as I illustrate the theoretical and methodological advantages by analyzing Porter's work through close readings. His first two novels, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*² and *Lanny*³, both combining typographical experimentalism and narrative multiperspectivity (Wojtas 2024, 95), are excellent case studies. More poetic than diegetic, they present difficulties for classical narratological approaches and thus opportunities for demonstrating the value of a 4E perspective that accounts for textual materiality. Through innovative use of language and layout, both novels excel at foregrounding the experiences of characters. In *Grief*, characters named Dad and Boys, who are numbed by mourning, encounter Crow, who creatively looks for ways to make them feel things again. *Lanny* features a unique boy of the same name, his family and surroundings, and Dead Papa Toothwort—a mythical creature who ends up seizing the boy for himself. Rather than foregrounding the story, the novel immerses readers in all kinds of perceptual experiences.

While *Lanny* is more visually experimental, the formal innovation and interpretative difficulties for readers of *Grief* should not be underestimated (Cheong 2024, 2). Both containing different degrees of experimentality and multimodality, an analysis of both novels lends itself especially well to move from more traditional forms of reader experiences towards more experimental elements, such as synesthetic and multimodal metaphors. In particular, I examine how these novels enable and constrain action-perception, memory, imagination, and empathy. By considering textual and material components simultaneously, I develop insights about the interplay between textual and material cues, perception, memory and imagination that would otherwise separately and thus only partially surface. To illustrate the role of visual semiotic devices alongside linguistic ones, I have opted to use images rather than text when referring to fragments from these novels.

By incorporating textual materiality in enactivist theory, I propose that readers *make sense of* narratives through sensory imagination, combining experiential traces with textual and material cues to enact perceptual experiences. I illustrate this through examples of perceiving characters, mirroring effects and the role of focalization and perspective, broadening narratological concepts such as deixis to include both textual and material elements. Thus, I attempt to expose perception, imagination, memory and empathy to be intertwined in reading and meaning-making processes.

² Throughout this paper, I employ '*Grief*' when referring to the title. References to specific passages will be preceded by the initial *G*, followed by a page number

³ References to specific passages will be preceded by the initial *L*, followed by a page number.

When examining readerly imagination, it is particularly interesting to look at how material and textual cues in Porter's work may prompt unfamiliar sensory imagination, confronting readers with narrated perceptual experiences that their own bodies haven't yet encountered. In this context, I pay special attention to synesthetic metaphors, as this stylistic device challenges readers' perceptual categories. My argument here will be that, even when readers are confronted with unfamiliar perception, they can rely on experiential traces relating to (components of) that perception. As such, they are capable of dealing with the narrated perception by depending on textual and material cues as well as their own bodies to make sense of those narrative encounters.

Consolidating theory and insights from my own analysis, I acknowledge that the "experiential feel" of reading results from sensory imagination (Caracciolo 2014; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 72) and draws on "experiential traces" (Zwaan 2008). However, I also posit that the interaction between readers and materially constituted narrative texts cannot so easily be dissected into verbal and material components. By using multimodal literary examples, I demonstrate that this distinction is artificial and that isolating either factor results in an incomplete view. Only by examining text and materiality simultaneously can we achieve a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which readers make sense of narrative.

Enactivism: looking inwards

Ever since the 1970s, phenomenological accounts of narrative have shifted the emphasis from textual form to readerly activity (Kilgore 2012, 298). In recent years, readers' bodies have enjoyed increasing narratological interest. Embodiment, referring to the dynamical interactions between brain, body, and physical/cultural environment (Gibbs 2005, 66-67), has become difficult to ignore. This is why Armstrong calls for retaining the foundations of cognitive narratology, but understanding them in a non-schematized, interactive form (2019, 410 and 2020, 17). He questions whether traditional concepts like cognitive schemata, frames and scripts can do justice to the cognitive processes they purport (Armstrong 2019, 407).

What Armstrong calls for is a more enactivist cognitive narratology. Enactivists, who claim that intentionally directed cognition and perceptual experience are possible without representational content, have made a strong case for themselves (Hutto and Myin 2012, x and Hutto and Myin 2023). Convincingly, they posit that "the vast sea of what humans do and experience is best understood by appealing to dynamically unfolding, situated embodied interactions and engagements with worldly

offerings” (Hutto and Myin 2012, ix). 4E approaches to cognition foreground the embodied, enactive, embedded and extended nature of mind (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 4).⁴

Thus, enactivist or 4E narratologists look to embodied interactions between readers and narratives to explain the phenomenological experience of reading, proposing a close connection between experience and interpretation (Caracciolo 2016, 215). Finding much inspiration and empirical support because of its rich interdisciplinary tradition, enactivism has continuously gained ground over the last decade (Hutto and Myin 2023). Being more intimately connected to what reading experiences are actually like, 4E narratology turned out to be exceptionally well-equipped to investigate the interaction between embodied readers and narrative texts.

It seems odd then, that despite its attention for the role of reader’s material bodies in narrative engagements, 4E narratology does not practice a similar commitment to the material dimension of narrative texts. Key 4E concepts, such as sensory imagination, perceptual simulation and kinesthetic empathy, have enabled it to approach reading similarly to the way enactivists examine perception, but the materiality those readers are engaged with seems to have disappeared from its theoretical and methodological framework. Following Noë’s claim that “the brain is one element in a complex network involving the brain, the body, and the environment”, what 4E narratology has done is to “look inward, to the neural plumbing”, but at the same time it seems to have neglected looking outward, “to the way that plumbing is hooked up to the world” (Noë 2004, 214, 222). Thus, while moving beyond the brain-bound model of cognition, a tendency emerged to relocate materiality into the virtual realm of readerly imagination. While the reader is understood to be engaged with a text outside of their cognition, this text has seemingly disappeared from perceptible reality. It seems the more 4E narratologists focused on the material body of the reader, the less material their readers’ surroundings became.

As enactivists have shown so convincingly, we cannot read without our bodies. Without embodied perception, text becomes inaccessible. However, without textual materiality, there would be nothing to perceive. There would be no cover to hold, printed text to see or turned page to hear. In other words, “the way in which we encounter narratives are material through and through: texts are always embedded in, and inextricable from, a certain material context” (Caracciolo 2023, 41). While significant advances have recently been made to establish a connection between 4E narratology and materiality, much work remains to be done. For 4E narratology to be truly enactivist, it needs to take up its commitment to materiality once again by paying attention to the role it plays in narrative engagements. Moreover, this will not only lead to a better understanding of the materiality of that interaction, but also illuminate how readers deal with textual cues, as their material form always impacts reader-text encounters.

⁴ Hutto and Myin propose using the term ‘extensive’ rather than ‘extended’ to better express how cognitive processes are “a form of wide reaching activity that is—at root—extensive and unbounded; thus extensive minds are not merely, occasionally and in special circumstances, extended” (Hutto and Myin 2014, 2; Hutto and Myin 2023).

Materialism: looking outwards

Literature has a physical context which criticism should not ignore: “the printed book” (White 2005, 24). While still largely absent in 4E narratology, some enactivist scholars have pointed out the necessity of taking into account the materiality of literature. Caracciolo, for example, acknowledges that direct representation is only one side of narrative’s negotiation of materiality (2023, 41). Even ‘normal’ paratexts, such as typeface, paragraphing or footnotes, are internal to the text, meaning that “no text ever has a truly paratext-free moment” (Stanitzek 2005, 30). We do not simply encounter text on its own, but the material features that embody it as well (Eggert 2012, 32). Simply put, “without writing, words as such have no visual presence.” (Ong 1982, 31).

At the same time, while materialist accounts of literature do engage with its materiality, they often disregard the enactive ways in which readers approach that materiality. This means that analyses accommodating the full materiality of literature remain rare⁵ and theoretical grounding for such an analysis dispersed. Thus, it seems the material turn has turned into a material split, with scholars either studying the materiality of interpretation (4E narratology) or the interpretation of materiality (materialism). Instead, we should not simply account for the way in which non-linguistic modalities affect reader experience, but for their interaction with textual elements in embodied meaning-making processes as well.

In the same way that literary style has been observed to amplify the embodiment of language comprehension and immersion (see, for example, Bolens 2012), this can also be said about various other meaningful modes. However, texts that are oriented towards the multiple meanings of materiality tend to be formally and conceptually innovative (Caracciolo 2023, 10), challenging existing theory and methodology. Examining meaning-making in narrative texts which rely on multiple semiotic modalities, such as *Grief* and *Lanny*, requires new ways to employ 4E tools. Thankfully, looking at multimodality studies may offer some help.

Multimodal meaning-making

Multimodal printed literature employs multiple semiotic modalities, such as (unusual) layout, typography, images, etc. (Gibbons 2012, 1). The foregrounding of such modalities prompts readers to integrate narrative materials from narrative, non-narrative, paratextual and marginal material (Kilgore 2012, 319). Moreover, as “human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity” (Hayles 1999, 5), not all experiences are easily expressed in words. Nonverbal modalities can prove useful to capture such features (Caracciolo 2023, 43). Thus, materiality becomes more noticeable in the engagement between text and reader. (Gibbons 2012, 41). As multimodality studies suggest, the written

⁵ A notable exception being Caracciolo 2023, especially Chapter 3: The Ethics of Materiality in the Multimodal Novel.

language which makes up those words must be recognized as a material medium with distinctive expressive capacities as well (Caracciolo 2023, 41). As I will demonstrate, even seemingly tangential choices like paragraph division have an impact on reader experience. Thus, phenomenologically and materially, all texts are multimodal.

As the senses never operate independently (Ghanzanfar and Schroeder 2006, 278), we should note that reading is not exclusively visual. One touches the pages, hears the sound they make when they are turned and can even smell books.⁶ Especially if we take sensory imagination seriously, narratives are multisensory through and through. Readers do not only imagine the sound of visual words on the page, but also other kinds of sensory impressions conveyed in those words.

Still, it is necessary to clearly differentiate between semiotic modalities and sensory categorization. Simply connecting modes with one of the five senses results in a categorization that turns out to be too crude (Forceville 2006, 382) and inevitably results in a reductionist account. Hence, it feels useful to clarify what is meant by a mode. Ruth Page defines it as “an open-ended set, ranging across a number of systems including but not limited to language, image, color, typography, music, voice quality, dress, gesture, spatial resources, and cuisine” (Page 2009, 6). Note that sensory boundaries are still quite present in this list and that Page seemingly tried to include all senses in some way.⁷ While remaining open-ended, Page’s definition offers more flexibility, but remains concrete enough to retain its utility.

While acknowledging the multimodal nature of all literature and the multisensory experience of all reading, it remains useful to examine literature which significantly foregrounds that multimodality or multisensory experiences. In their often experimental and innovative ways, these texts challenge existing theory by demonstrating more clearly how different semiotic modes or multisensory cues can impact our reading experience in various ways.

I already noted the fact that the narrative meaning of a text is too often explained in terms of either the material properties of that text or the ways embodied readers may respond its textual elements. To understand what engagements textual and material elements offer to embodied readers, from a perspective integrating 4E and materialist theory, it does not suffice to simply add one account to the other. As different semiotic modes are not present separately, but produce narrative meaning in their interaction (Gibbons 2012, 2), what is needed is an approach which accounts for these modes simultaneously.

Cluster analysis seems particularly well-equipped in this regard, offering a flexible analysis of micro and macro level multimodal meaning-making (Baldry and Thibault 2006, 31). To resolve the lack of a rigorous identification system for these clusters, I follow Gibbons’ proposal to rely on structures of

⁶ For an excellent examination of the role kinesthetic and haptic components play in reading, see McGrath 2015.

⁷ While touch is not as clearly present, some gestures and spatial resources may be related to it.

visual perception (2012, 17). Especially the concepts of figure and ground seems useful to identify clusters as well as to understand some of their effects, as they relates to the perception of visual structures as related and/or meaningful (Gibbons 2012, 4, 43). Integrating this into 4E narratology, however, I also consider the ways in which our sensory apparatus and imagination may be prompted as well as the narratological structures these clusters find themselves to be embedded in.

Stockwell identifies elements which tend to catch reader attention as attractors (2009, 20-30). These can be linguistic in nature, such as active verbs or adjectivized items, but paratextual elements can perform similar functions. Following Stockwell, I consider self-containment, movement in relation to a static ground, temporal or spatial precedence and salient features such as details, brightness, color and size to result in figure creation (2002, 15). Especially in regard to salience, van Leeuwen's list of typographical features proves useful, noting the weight, expansion, slope, curvature, connectivity, orientation, regularity, and flourishes of text (2006, 144-145). My use of these categorizations is relatively flexible, to allow approaching clusters on their own terms, in their own particular textual, material and narratological context. It is important to note that devices harnessing dynamic force, directionality and orientation can influence eye movement and reading paths (Baldry and Thibault 2006, 35-36). Consequently, I pay special attention to features deviating from conventional western reading patterns (a typeset block, read linearly from left to right and top to bottom; see Gibbons 2012, 4).

While multimodality studies examine the effect of multimodal semiosis, the field also exhibits a lack of attention to the role of embodied readers. Gibbons proposes to make up for this through a cognitive approach (2012, 17-18). To account for the phenomenological aspect of reading, I examine the semiotic effects of multimodality from a 4E perspective. In fact, it seems odd that 4E narratology has not had a bigger impact on the study of multimodal narratives. Its sustained attention to perception offers a promising methodology for these texts, especially considering the intersections of multimodality and multisensory experiences. In what follows, I will attempt to demonstrate this by integrating insights from materialism and multimodality studies into 4E narratology and applying them to multimodal and multisensory semiosis in *Grief* and *Lanny*.

An integrated approach

Perception, memory, imagination

In enactivist theory, actions are understood as constitutive elements of cognition and perception (Stewart et al. 2010; Chemero 2011; Grammont et al. 2010, as cited in in Bernini 2021, 88). As enactivists understand experiences and perception as embodied interactions between subject and environment, they focus on sensorimotor patterns in these interactions (Caracciolo 2014, 98). In this sense, experience is as much about how we interact with the world as about what we experience (Hutto 2000, 135). This is what Maxine Sheets-Johnstone means with the “primacy of movement”, proposing a non-separation of

thinking and doing, of sensing and moving (2011, 447). Moreover, this enactivist idea is supported by neuroscientific evidence (see, for example, Gallese 2005, 25). Thus, perception is not located exclusively in the brain; we gain visual experiences by looking around just like we obtain tactile impressions by touching things (Noë 2004, 73).

Because our linguistic and conceptual life is grounded in embodied experience (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, as cited in Bernini 2021, 111), our engagement with narrative texts works in a similar way. Despite being mediated by language, readers can simulate the embodied response of real-world interactions by enacting sensorimotor patterns they are familiar with through those interactions (Caracciolo 2014, 101-102). The resulting imagination does not necessarily entail propositional content (Caracciolo 2014, 93). As Hutto states, the only way to understand “what-it-is-like” to have an experience is to actually undergo it or re-imagine undergoing it (2006, 52). Indeed, it is more like “having the feel of this wash over”, “mapping it out without the discrimination of interpretation” (Williams 1998, 107).

Importantly, while the term ‘simulation’ is often used by 4E narratologists, it differs significantly from simulation as traditionally meant in simulation theory, where it is defined as containing an aspect of instrumentality and control by the subject as well as a dimension of pretense (Gallagher and Zahavi 2008, 177-181). Instead, following Gallese, I understand perceptual simulation to be “an automatic (in the sense that it is obligatory), unconscious and prereflexive mechanism” (2005, 41).

Furthermore, these ideas resonate with neuroscientific findings. As Jeannerod stated, “imagining a movement relies on the same mechanisms as actually performing it”, because “imagined actions are indeed actions in their own right: they involve a kinematic content, they activate motor areas almost to the same extent as executed actions, they involve the autonomic system as if a real action was under way” (2006, 28, 39). Moreover, there is a substantial overlap between the brain regions used for visual perception and visual mental imagery (Ganis 2013, 11; see also Kosslyn, Ganis and Thompson 2001). Indeed, people directly experience narrated sensory stimuli in their mind in a perceptual way (Bernini 2021, 93). These (simulated) perceptual experiences have distinct phenomenal characteristics which are recognizable and verbally describable as in perceptual terms (Hurlburt et al. 2017, 4). Thus, the imagining of sensory experiences turns out to be perceptual itself, both phenomenologically and neuroscientifically.

Crucially, imagination is underpinned by memory (Ferryhough 2012, 5) and both are closely interwoven in our brains (Josselyn and Tonegawa 2020, as cited in Silva 2024, 215). As a result, imagination is enabled and constrained by our own experiences (Nagel 1974, 439). In this sense, memory is considered as a kind of experiential resource on which readers can draw to interpret or give meaning to fiction (Duthoy and Silva, in press; see also Herman and Vervaeck 2009, 174). It is in this way that Caracciolo understands “experiential traces” as a kind of sensory residue left by a large number of past interactions with the world, used to construct (narrative) experiences. (2014, 46, 99; see also Duthoy and Silva, in

press). Other scholars understand this residue to be constituted by memories of very early experiences which predate the appearance of verbal language, stored and expressed as sensations rather than in highly elaborate form (Bogdashina 2010, 68).

In *Lanny*, we find a wonderful illustration of what this may look like, following Pete's stream of consciousness when Lanny tells him he hates the smell of metal (*L* 38):

I hate the smell of metal, Pete.

[...]

The smell of metal scares me, he says.

At once I am a child again, smelling my palms.

Blood iron, coins, nails and pins.

War men with bullets and rusty hinge grins.

The smell of metal lingers on my lips and on my fingers.

My father would have me count his coppers on a
Sunday. Memory swings like a hard dirt rudder then
slips up with a boom and a crack and catches the wind.

God, Lanny, I say. I hate the smell of metal too. I
despise the smell of metal on my hands.

As Pete is confronted with Lanny's verbal reference to a perceptual stimulus ("the smell of metal"), he *makes sense* of it through something resembling sensory imagination. Different kinds of sensory residue from his own embodied memory seem to collapse into a kind of composite sensory experience, which leads him to conclude that he hates the smell of metal too. Notably, following particular olfactory associations, he cannot help but add that he despises the smell of metal on his hands.

Just like Pete enacts a perceptual experience combining a verbal cue with his own embodied memories, readers enact narrated perception by drawing on their own experiential traces. This interaction evokes an "experiential feel", a bodily-perceptual dimension of reading resembling actual perception, which cannot be reduced to linguistic meaning (Caracciolo 2014, 95-102). As such, perception, memory and imagination are exposed to be thoroughly intertwined, as bodily history becomes embodied memory.

Numbing grief: where are the fire engines?

Remarkably, Max Porter also found an opposite way of immersing readers. By mobilizing the absence of sensorimotor cues, he is able to convey a sense of numbness, as the grieving character Dad feels "hung-empty" and considers the fact that "nothing moved" (*G* 4). This drained feeling of being stuck is

emphasized by the anaphora “waiting for shock to give way, waiting for any kind of feeling to emerge from the organisational fakery of my days” (Nibakure 2021, paragraph 7).

The scarcity of sensorimotor cues results in limited opportunities for sensorimotor imagination, making it difficult for readers to feel anything. This enables a mirroring effect, where reader and narrator adjust to the storyworld similarly (Caracciolo 2016, 182), through a lack of feeling. Like their father, the boys are puzzled by the lack of impact the loss of their mother has on their surroundings (Rivera-Izquierdo 2024, 93). Crucially, it is again the absence of intense perceptual stimuli that is described by the boys, who would have expected the situation to call for “fire engines”, “screaming”, “flinging bits of emergency glow-in-the-dark equipment” or “horrible levels of noise” (*G* 13-14).

To combat their senselessness, Crow submerges them in various sensations. Even before we encounter his perspective, he presents the other characters with intense perceptual experiences. Strikingly, one of these sensations is an encounter that readers share with characters. Just like the boys are astonished by the feather on their pillow, readers encounter such a feather on each part title page and thus discover a bodily trace of Crow before the character introduces himself to the others. Unsure of how to deal with this feather, both readers and the boys are inclined to “leave the feathers where they are” (*G* 3). Importantly, already Crow causes the boys to move from their beds to the floor (*G* 3) as readers decide to turn the page.

Dad, on the other hand, immediately gets “smacked back” by Crow’s sensory impressions (*G* 6). During their first encounter, Crow engages the entire range of his sensorium (“a crack and a whoosh [...] pitch black [...] a rich smell of decay, a sweet furry stink of just-beyond-edible food, and moss, and leather, and yeast [...] Feathers between my fingers, in my eyes, in my mouth”; *G* 6). Here, like Dad, readers are confronted and disoriented by the feathers, still unsure how to interpret them, but inescapably surrounded by them.

Throughout *Grief*, Crow continuously confronts the father and his boys with intense sensory encounters. In this way, the initial feeling of senselessness is countered and Crow enables characters and readers to make sense of grief, progressively dismantling the shared numbness. In Crow’s words, the feathers are meant “for a little break in the mourning” (*G* 10).

Lost and found: multimodal mirroring

In internally focalized passages, readers adopt the perspective of the focalizing character (Coplan 2004, 142-143), whose movements through the storyworld they can then reenact (Caracciolo 2016, 217). This process can be induced or influenced by deictic terms and parameters, such as pronouns, demonstratives, and adverbs, encoding the positionality of language users (Gibbons 2012, 30-36). Using this term in a multimodal narratological context, I employ it in a way that also encompasses the positionality of

narrators, focalizers and/or characters and allow both verbal and non-verbal cues to serve as deictic elements.

In his work, Porter extensively employs a represented “route” through narrative space (Tversky 1991, 109-145; see also Tversky 1996). Because readers resonate on a bodily level with these movements, immersion in the storyworld is heightened as they follow the characters almost step by step in kinesthetic empathy. The following scene, in which Lanny’s Dad goes to find him in the garden, is a good example (*L* 39-40):

I tiptoe hurriedly across the bedroom, out onto the
landing, down the stairs, avoiding the creaky step.
I’m not sure why I’m being secretive. I go through
the kitchen and out of the open back door.

[...]

I wander over, heavy footfall and a cough so as not
to surprise.

In this case, linguistic deictic elements (“across”, “out onto”, “down”, “through”, “out”, “over”) combine with sensorimotor cues (“tiptoe”, “heavy footfall”, “cough”) to immerse readers in the perspective of Lanny’s Dad. This invites them to imagine these movements as if the character’s body were at the center of their experiences of the storyworld (Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2021, 68). In this way, the interaction between deictic elements and sensorimotor cues heightens the possibilities for kinesthetic empathy and immersion.

An opposite mirroring effect can be experienced in reading the second part of the book, when Lanny goes missing and the narrative structure and layout collapse. The separate narrators become harder to distinguish as passages are no longer headed by the focalizer’s name, new, unknown narrators appear and the pages are filled with crosses as the only indication of a switch in perspective. Because of the textual fragmentation, emphasized by the crosses breaking down any attempt at coherence, it becomes difficult for readers to orient themselves. Language and layout work together in creating a lack of perspective, generating an impression of feeling lost for readers and characters, whose unease rises as it becomes harder to grasp the fragmenting story structure or to find Lanny, respectively.

The crosses contribute to the disorientation and show how deictic functions are not limited to textual elements. This is demonstrated most clearly in an earlier passage, when Pete narrates a moment when he thinks he has lost Lanny. We follow his stream of consciousness until, suddenly, something is heard “from way up above me”, referring to the positionality of Lanny (*L* 56):

Where is he?

Lanny?

Then from way up above me,

There are bees up here!

There are bees up here!

Pete, there are bees up here!

He is fifty foot high, clambering about the crown of
a vast chestnut, foreshortened like a painted trompe
l'oeil angel in the rigging of the wood.

While we already feel a certain distance and directionality because of the verbal cue “from way up above me”, it is accompanied by a deviant paratextual feature: the smaller font size of the words “There are bees up here!”. Because of its smaller (and continuously growing) font size, it stands out against the text surrounding it. Here, the capacity of visual salience to suggest sonic salience (Gibbons 2012, 21) is mobilized to create another mirroring effect between the reader and Pete. As the font starts out so small, it is relatively difficult for readers to make out the words. It is only once the font size increases and the message becomes clearer, that Pete locates Lanny “fifty foot high, clambering about the crown of a vast chestnut”.

Additionally, a synesthetic kind of connection presents itself. Readers are challenged to interpret Lanny’s spoken words growing in size. To do so, they can rely on the experience of seeing visual stimuli growing in size to mean they are getting closer. As the visual stimulus here concerns speech however, vision has to be substituted for sound. As embodied memory tells us, approaching sound is experienced as becoming louder and the excerpt allows for such an interpretation. In both the case of seeing and hearing, the message also becomes clearer as it gets closer. Thus, the textual and paratextual elements enable an embodied interpretation of growing volume and/or a clearer understanding.

Both for Pete and for readers, the message starts out difficult to discern and ends up being clear. Without the narrative structure of Pete looking for Lanny, the deictic elements or the deviant layout, readers would be a lot less likely to fully grasp how the message becomes clearer in the process of locating the voice. As the different semiotic modalities strengthen one another’s deictic meaning, a higher degree of reader immersion and bodily resonance is developed. Importantly for my argument, this process cannot be fully grasped without taking both the material text and the embodied reader into account. Considering them separately risks reducing this complex interaction to its isolated parts.

Useless objects

Gibson’s affordance theory states that we do not directly perceive object properties, but the possible actions those objects afford (1979, 127). As such, it seems especially well-suited as a meeting point for

4E narratology and materialism, as it connects the material presence of objects to embodied observers. Moreover, something strongly resembling affordances appears in the neuroscientific observation that seeing or hearing an object automatically triggers a “plan” for a specific action directed towards it (Gallese 2005, 27). Furthermore, this plan does not necessarily imply contentful cognition and is flexible (Gallese 2005), as brain function and connectivity can change with experience (Armstrong 2019, 413-414). Importantly, affordances are also built into linguistic comprehension (Caracciolo 2014, 20).

A clear example of how this works for readers presents itself in the “route” passage discussed earlier, where we follow Lanny’s Dad to the garden. In imagining the narrated “avoiding the creaky step”, most readers will still imagine the sound of that step (likely aided by the onomatopoeic character of “creaky”), even if this sound does not occur in the narrative. This perceptual simulation follows from the interpretation of “creaky step” in terms of its affordances for readers. As most readers can rely on their previous (real-world) interactions with creaky steps, they are aware of its affordances in interactions, even if that interaction remains absent.

The use of object affordances in the absence of their execution reoccurs throughout *Grief*. As objects are laden with traces and potential, grief is exposed to be contagious, transferred by association between objects and subjects alike (Ahmed 2010, 29-37). As empathy does not require an animate target (Suzanne Keen 2011, 356), readers are able to empathize even with grief-laden objects. Consider the following passage (*G* 20):

The house becomes a physical encyclopedia of no-longer hers,
which shocks and shocks and is the principal difference between
our house and a house where illness has worked away. Ill
people, in their last day on Earth, do not leave notes stuck to
bottles of red wine saying ‘OH NO YOU DON’T COCK-CHEEK’.
She was not busy dying, and there is no detritus of care, she was
simply busy living, and then she was gone.

She won’t ever use (make-up, turmeric, hairbrush, thesaurus).

She will never finish (Patricia Highsmith novel, peanut butter,
lip balm).

And I will never shop for green Virago Classics for her birthday.

I will stop finding her hairs.

I will stop hearing her breathing.

In this scene, Dad finds himself in a house filled with traces of his dead wife, objects that he perceives only as their affordances for her. Moreover, they are connected to her through strong bodily associations. It is almost as if, through Dad’s eyes, the make-up, hairbrush, lip-balm and hairs, conjure up her face,

hair, lips, and even her breathing. But, as she is of course no longer in the house and her traces are disappearing, the objects become useless, attuned to an absence. A parallel presents itself; just like the objects, Dad is oriented towards interactions that are no longer possible. In this waiting-for-nothing quality, they become equally redundant.

Unfamiliar bodies, synesthetic perception

Empathy, “the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation” (*Cambridge Dictionary*, retrieved May 13 2025), is a crucial aspect of 4E theory. For enactivists too, empathy depends on imagination, internally simulating what the other must be feeling as if their sensations were our own (Armstrong 2019, 404).

Neuroscientifically, embodied simulation seems to be at the basis of social understanding, because we understand someone else's experience through a sensorimotor re-enactment, producing a shared body state (Gallese 2005, 24, 32-39). In doing so, we need to rely on our own resources to interpret the external (or represented) world through “a direct, automatic and unconscious process of motor simulation” (Gallese 2005, 35). Phenomenologically, this involves a kinesthetic kind of empathy, consisting of “an experienced sense of involvement in another person's bodily movements”, requiring “only affective resonance and physical coordination between bodies” (Caracciolo 2020, 243). As such, empathy can be understood as to a large extent depending on (sensorimotor) imagination.

Yawning and its contagiousness may offer an example. Here too, a mirroring system is at work, where individuals share physiological and associated emotional states based on perceived motor patterns (Haker, Kawohl and Rössler 2013, 28). When we perceive someone yawning, not only do we internally simulate the same bodily state and action without any conscious decision, we often also perform it, without needing to resort to propositional content in any significant way.

Importantly for 4E narratology, there is ample empirical evidence for the role that embodied simulations play in language understanding and neuroscientific evidence for the embodiment of abstract concepts has been growing over the years (Caracciolo 2014). For example, Pulvermüller found that a common substrate is involved in the processing of actions and the meaning of action words (2005, 578). Behavioral studies point to a similar conclusion (Caracciolo 2020, 244). Relying on the same resources to make sense of real-world or narrated interactions results in an empathetic feeling of becoming the character that we read (Armstrong 2019, 404; Caracciolo 2020, 240). Just as inferences about other people's behavior depends on our mirroring circuit (Gallese 2005, 33), so does the interpretation of characters.

If, as 4E narratologists have demonstrated extensively, empathy depends largely on (sensorimotor) imagination, which in turn depends on memory, then empathy must at least indirectly rely on memory to some extent as well. Duthoy and Silva (in press) came to a similar conclusion when looking at the

relation between empathy felt by readers towards characters and their own (experiential) background. While differences in background, social position and culture can result in differing degrees of empathy with certain characters, personal memories and their emotional intensity appear to be a bigger factor than identification with characters (Duthoy and Silva, in press). As such, readers are capable of empathizing with profoundly different characters (Kokkola 2015, 402). In fact, the (cognitive) weirdness of characters can even tinge reading experiences through feelings of strangeness (Caracciolo 2016, 208), which happens both in *Grief* and in *Lanny*. Neither Crow nor Dead Papa Toothwort are well-delineated agents, as they even resemble a kind of multiplicity at times, complicating empathy.⁸

Thus, these weird characters warrant attention from a 4E perspective. To empathize kinesthetically with characters' bodies so different from their own, readers need to rely on experiential resources and imagination in creative ways. The cues offered by the material text are essential in this process, as readers can interact with various semiotic modalities conveying divergent bodily and perceptual experiences. Indeed, as Porter reveals in an interview, his use of formal devices is meant to provoke empathetic responses from readers (Wojtas 2024, 106, footnote 4). Here, Porter refers in the first place to linguistic devices (2019b), but his use of non-verbal semiotic modalities enables similar effects in different ways.

Krickle crackle, hop sniff and tackle: a birdlike Crow

Porter wanted *Grief* "to be bird-like, to hop and soar and surprise as actual crows do." (Whitwham 2016). And indeed, Crow's sections in *Grief* have a birdlike character to them.⁹ First and foremost, this is achieved through language. Porter employs short sentences with many but often limited perceptual stimuli, mimicking the quick head movements of the bird, for example when introducing the character (G 9):

CROW

Very romantic, how we first met. Badly behaved. Trip trap.
Two-bed upstairs flat, spit-level, slight barbed-error,
snuck in easy through the wall and up the attic bedroom
to see those cotton boys silently sleeping, intoxicating
hum of innocent children, lint, flack, gack-pack-nack, the
whole place was heavy mourning, every surface dead
Mum, every crayon, tractor, coat, welly, covered in a film
of grief. Down the dead Mum stairs, plinkety plink curled
claws whisper, down to Daddy's recently Mum-and-Dad's
bedroom. I was Herne the hunter hornless, funt. Munt.

⁸ About our empathetic bias towards individuals, see Decety and Cowell 2015, 9-10.

⁹ For an expansive study on ornithology in *Grief*, see Rudrum and Underwood 2024.

As readers, it seems hard to keep pace with Crow's movements. Before we can make sense of an impression, he's already moving on to the next, seemingly continuously interrupting our sensory imagination. However, through these short sentences and limited perceptual stimuli, we actually do get a feeling of what it is like being a bird, seeing the world in short bursts, hopping from one impression to the other and our attention constantly redirected. Moreover, the words chosen by the birdlike narrator reinforce this impression. Consider for example (*G* 80):

Krickle krackle, hop sniff and tackle, in with the bins,
singing the hymns.

Throughout *Grief*, Crow seems to be practicing language through word association chains, which often seem linked by their sound more than by their meaning, resembling an infant practicing their voice. The result resembles a mimicry of human speech rather than meaningful language. Still, deploying the same, birdlike style, there is an impression of hopping from one linguistic snippet to the next. In sections like these, readers are invited to imagine Crow as moving before thinking. Neither they nor Crow can predict on which words they will land next, but at the same time, there is a kind of hidden rhythm in these movements, inaccessible to humans.

While *Grief* is not as typographically experimental as *Lanny*, the typesetting does play a role in Crow's portrayal. While *Grief* contains a lot of white space in general (notably containing a white page after Crow leaves the narrative), this is far less the case for the passages narrated by Crow. While there is certainly some variation in the degree to which pages are filled with text, the contrast between the introductions of the characters is certainly noticeable. The first section narrated by Boys contains six simple sentences, each as a paragraph on its own, on one page, with much blank space between the lines (*G* 3), while Dad's first section spreads 27 paragraphs across five pages (*G* 4-8), with a similar amount of white space between them. The first section narrated by Crow, on the other hand, fills its first page with one full block of text, while the second page contains three paragraphs fitted closely together. The first paragraph spacing similar to the previous sections appears only to introduce Dad's voice (making a "ghoeeze" sound twice; *G* 9-10). Furthermore, Crow's perspective contains elements like "(BIRD FEATHERS UP YER CRACK, DOWN YER COCK-EYE, IN YER MOUTH)" (*G* 10). The capitalization, which can be used to suggest shouting (Nørgaard 2009, 150), contrasts with the parentheses, which would normally imply information of a supplementary kind. This illustrates that there is a different logic to Crow's narration.

Thus, textual and paratextual devices result in a birdlike Crow, "head down, tot-along, looking" (*G* 22). The typesetting, short sentences, and rapid succession of perceptual cues all enable readers to enact quick movements paired with snap impressions. Moreover, this unfamiliar, seemingly interrupted sensory imagination is evoked both by the sound of the written words (through reader subvocalization),

when readers process the sound-based word associations and by their meaning (through reader interpretation).

Filling in the gaps: synesthetic language and layout

Literature mobilizes the underspecification of language and the potential of these absences for improvisatory and unpredictable responses (Armstrong 2020, 146) to prompt readers into “imaginative leaps” (Cave 2016, 27). This works via the principle of minimal departure, according to which readers fill in the gaps in narratives by assuming similarities to their own experiential reality (Ryan 2005, 447). As such, this principle connects seamlessly to 4E ideas about the interplay of imagination, memory and empathy as well as to affordance theory. Moreover, it applies not only to opportunities offered by linguistic underspecification, as other semiotic modalities are always open-ended too.

Let’s turn to *Grief* for a basic example of the way in which readers fill in the gaps by drawing on memory and experienced affordances for their imagination. When Gran tells the boys that if they help themselves to the cigarettes in the kitchen drawers, one day too they will wheeze like her (*G* 34), readers will likely infer that, in her hypothesis, the boys would also smoke the cigarettes. This is because readers can depend on their familiarity with the affordances of cigarettes. Importantly, filling even such basic gaps reinforces immersion, as readers connect their own daily, nonliterary experiences to the narrative (Elaine Auyoung 2013, 60). Because of this, narrative impact depends on the extent to which our engagement with its representational and expressive devices connects to our own embodied interactions with the world (Caracciolo 2014, 205).

Thus, both in real-world perception and in narrative engagements, embodied cognition is profoundly informed by sensing, comparing and negotiating predictions about our world and the storyworld (Kukkonen 2014A, 372; Armstrong 2020, 147). In this context, Kukkonen speaks about a “probability design” in narratives, a dynamic, fluid, complex interaction entailing a continuous confirmation or contradiction of readers’ (mostly intuitive) expectations (Kukkonen 2016, 157).

Metaphorical language can give readers a sense of what an experience is like by weaving together two experiential traces, bringing about defamiliarizing effects (Caracciolo 2014, 108). In this sense, unfamiliar perception is especially interesting, as unfamiliar sensory metaphors increase the strain on readers’ experiential background (Caracciolo 2014, 109). As processing metaphors depends on a greater involvement of our sensory apparatus (Lacey et al. 2012), synesthetic metaphors, featuring prominently in *Lanny*, challenge readers to imagine such a perceptual experience. Moreover, harnessing multiple modalities to evoke a sense of synesthesia, the novel offers an excellent case study of how readers make sense of unfamiliar perception in their interaction with multimodal semiotic devices.

Tsur distinguishes neuropsychological synesthesia, the “joining of sense impressions derived from the various sensory domains” from verbal synesthesia, “the joining of terms derived from the vocabularies

of the various sensory domains” and literary synesthesia, “the exploitation of verbal synaesthesia for specific literary effects” (2006, 30). However, from an enactivist perspective, this distinction should not be overemphasized (Bernini 2021, 19), as our engagement with literature is inherently perceptual. Moreover, a synesthetic link is claimed to exist at a neurological and functional level as well (Ramachandran and Hubbar 2001, 18; Ramachandran and Brang 2008).¹⁰ In this way, synesthesia reveals a perceptual relationship to experience (Savarese 2015), with synesthetic metaphors conveying a pre-categorical impression of undifferentiated sensory aspects (Tsur 2012b, 58). As metaphor does not depend on an ability for abstract language, but on our physical experiences of the concrete, sensuous world (Cytowic and Eagleman 2011, 16), I argue that this refusal to behave categorically results in a significant appeal to the sensory imagination of readers to fill in the gaps creatively. If successful, this may result in a higher degree of immersion.

One of these creative opportunities is harnessed through a device I have termed a “synesthetic zoom-in”, which depends on the interplay of memory, imagination and empathy. Most synesthetic metaphors are a transfer from less differentiated sensations (smell, touch, taste) to more differentiated ones (sight, sound) (Tsur 2012a, 437), mapping more accessible concepts onto less accessible ones (Shen and Eisenman 2008, 111). This is because “upward” transfers, such as ‘a warm voice’ feel more natural than “downward” ones, such as ‘a loud feeling’ (Tsur 2012/A, 437). An added effect of upward transfers is that, phenomenologically, the described perception is brought closer to our perceived sphere of experientiality (Bernini 2021, 111), resulting in a synesthetic kind of zoom-in.

This can be explained by the role embodied memory plays in our perceptual simulations. As a stimulus usually perceived through sensory apparatus capable of perception from a distance (sight or sound) is described through a stimulus usually perceived from a much smaller distance (sound, smell of taste), we imagine it to be closer. Additionally, visual and auditive stimuli are experienced as less enactive and embodied as opposed to things that are felt, smelled or tasted (Shen and Eisenman 2008, 112). As we will see, this too has an impact on the effect of synesthetic metaphors. We find a wonderful synesthetic metaphor in the first sentence narrated by Lanny’s Mum (*L* 11):

In came the sound of a song,
warm on his creaturely breath.

The words “In came”, clearly articulating a directionality, function as a deictic indication, moving towards the focalizing character. Following are two references to auditory stimuli, “sound” and “song”. However, the sound of the words themselves create a consonance. Thus, semiotically, “sound of a song” is articulated through linguistic meaning and subvocalization. To imagine the scene, readers can employ

¹⁰ For example, as my analysis of *Lanny* will illustrate, there is a significant emphasis on hearing both in synesthesia and in synesthetic metaphors (Day 1996).

their own embodied auditive memory, based on countless similar encounters and perhaps already with a sense of directionality. As the narrative has not suggested any visual stimuli yet, readers may assume that the singing entity is not yet in sight.

The second line introduces temperature (“warm”). As cold and warmth are not perceived exclusively as a property of observed objects, but also as a part of the sensing subject’s psychological sensation (Shen and Eisenman 2008, 112), readers cannot help but rely on close-range embodied memories. Consequently, the scene enables a phenomenologically closer and more intense sensory imagination. Then, this close-range stimulus is expressed as a property of breath, something which also can only be perceived from a very close physical proximity.

In this way, readers are challenged to imagine the auditive “sound of a song” in terms of the close-range haptic “warm” and “breath”. Combined with the deictic “In came”, this creates the effect of an auditive stimulus approaching us. Thus, what will reveal itself as a “singing child” is already imbued with sensory stimuli carrying positive, close-range physical and metaphorical associations for most readers (“song”, “warm”, “breath”).¹¹ This enables the scene to exude a unique sensory delight and a sense of intimacy. As this is one of the first scenes, Porter infuses his novel with synesthetic style from the start, drawing on readers’ perceptual imagination to *make sense* of things.

This interplay between text and readers is not isolated from other modalities of narrative action, affecting reader expectations (Kukkonen 2014b). Dead Papa Toothwort is an excellent example of how readers deal with the interplay between various modalities. The character is introduced through a highly but unfamiliarly embodied language (L 3):

**Dead Papa Toothwort wakes from his standing
nap an acre wide and scrapes off dream dregs of
bitumen glistening thick with liquid globs of
litter. He lies down to hear hymns of the earth
(there are none, so he hums), then he shrinks,
cuts himself a mouth with a rusted ring pull and
sucks up a wet skin of acid-rich mulch and fruity
detritivores. He splits and wobbles, divides and
reassembles, coughs up a plastic pot and a
petrified condom, briefly pauses as a smashed
fibreglass bath, stumbles and rips off the mask,
feels his face and finds it made of long-buried
tannic acid bottles. Victorian rubbish.**

Portrayed as a “shape-shifting and ethereal eco-creature” (Drager 2024, 42), Dead Papa Toothwort resembles the folkloric Green Man (Irigaray 2024, 52), embodying nature’s agency (Heholt and

¹¹ Warmth returns as a positive motif, for example, when Pete describes Lanny’s Mum: “I liked her. Good for a natter. Warm, with a good eye for things.” (L 14).

Downing 2016, 2). Porter's liberal use of the figure also ties it to the village, which is at the same time a specific location in the storyworld and a symbol for the English countryside, mythologizing it. (Irigaray 2024, 57). As such, Dead Papa Toothwort is the village's living memory (Irigaray 2024, 58), embedded in the landscape (Heholt and Downing 2016, 2). Peculiarly, his body bears marks of the passing of time, such as "the initials of long-dead lovers carved in the surface" (L 4).

To convey such a creature, Porter employs a multimodal synesthetic style, combining layout with synesthetic poetic language, which especially engages the sensing body.¹² The figure of Dead Papa Toothwort in particular invites a reading that senses before it interprets. Symbolic of uncanny ecological forces beyond human perception (Calder 2024, 80), "He sits still. He listens." (L 4). The things he hears appear in curved text, as the typographical roundness evokes organic and natural associations (van Leeuwen 2005, 140). After being introduced to this character's strangeness through beautiful rhythm and alliterations, various semiotic modalities reflect that his perception differs from ours. Not only does the typography suggest a different kind of experience, synesthesia is suggested linguistically as well (L 7):

*countries can grow wrong,
never seen a fella more coke-fucked,
choir clashes with Benders sadly,
horrid parents,
pretty in a smudgy kind of way,
last glass then bed, blocked drains,
Iranian or something, piggish ginger son who bullied our Aaron,
coming in and out like the wind,
Sheila's salted caramel rice pudding sweet Jesus I died and went to heaven
nine English pound,*

**he swims in it, he gobbles it up and wraps himself
in it, he rubs it all over himself, he pushes it into his
holes, he gargles, plays, punctuates and grazes, licks
and slurps at the sound of it, wanting it fizzing on his
tongue, this place of his,**

*apple like that, professor says so, quiche au vomit,
the gate worn where she's leant on it seventy summers,
screaking like sexed-up foxes, he's a bum-bandit,
state of the toilets, fibre-optic, put our foot down,
fewer antibiotics healthier cows,
endless moaning,
of
roy first,*

¹² About the engagement between poetic language and sensory experience, see Savarese 2015.

Using metaphorical language related to varying sensory apparatus, like skin (“rubs”), throat (“gargles”) and tongue (“licks and slurps”), readers are challenged to reinvent perceptual categories to make sense of how they could “wrap” themselves in sentences or “slurp at the sound of it” (L 7).

As Biebuyck and Martens insist, metaphors need to be studied in interaction with focalizers (2011, 72-73). Destabilizing separations between the natural environment and anthropocentric culture (Calder 2024, 80), Dead Papa Toothwort is the perfect focalizing character for synesthetic metaphors. By weakening the boundaries between individual and environment, subject and object, synesthetic transfers are perceived as more natural (Tsur 2012a, 437). Because readers don’t possess the same perceptual abilities as Dead Papa Toothwort, a sense of curiosity and wonder is evoked, an imagined experience that is inaccessible in their daily lives.

The use of synesthetic style across multiple modalities is crucial in achieving this. The bold typeface accompanying Dead Papa Toothwort’s perspective already draws reader attention. However, his perspective often contains curved lines or overlapping text as well, which deviate even more from traditional reader expectations than the bold typeface. In this way, figure and ground become reversed as the murmurs of the village are brought to the foreground. Indeed, Porter found a way to make his novel “sound not text [...] to spill over the page” (Porter 2019b). Typography is crucial here, evoking overlapping sound fragments while making them visual and embodied (Drager 2024, 43).

By expressing sound through text, *Lanny* draws attention to the synesthetic nature of all literature. Writing itself can be understood as light and words cooperating to form a synesthetic visualization of auditive language (Bernini 2021, 115), whereas reading aloud would amount to an opposite synesthetic operation. Wojtas, paying attention to the material properties of the text, already noted how this visually oriented text gets readers to hear the voices of inhabitants. However, it is only by merging this materialist insight with a 4E perspective that we come to understand the phenomenological experience of this imagined sound.

The textual and material modalities of the novel join in multimodal metaphors,¹³ challenging readers to make sense of Dead Papa Toothwort’s perception by combining these with their own embodied experience in creative ways. We find many such examples in the sound snippets that Dead Papa Toothwort perceives, such as “a treasure trail” peeling down in a path-like form or “littleshit” written so closely together that you can almost see someone saying it through gritted teeth, pushing the letters through.¹⁴

¹³ I follow Gibbons’ definition of multimodal metaphors as metaphors occurring from the interaction and integration of modes (Gibbons 2012, 33), as it is less restrictive than Forceville’s (2009, 24) and thus more easily applicable, while retaining the multimodal character as a distinct feature impacting interpretation.

¹⁴ Note that the spelling of ‘littleshit’ enables this effect, having so many vertically oriented letters (l, i, t).

rooks quacking, laminate the rota,

year 9s lost control, *Agnetta's piled on the pounds,*
a sign up at Elm House,
quick *original windows, nip into town,* *my trusty friend Diarrhoea,*
kick-
about, *old people die,*
satsuma peel down the street like a treasure trail,
littleshit, *interesting light,*

Special Delivery and Signed For are not the same thing,

As readers navigate new ways to interpret textual and paratextual elements simultaneously, *Lanny* draws attention to two connected ideas: that the specific medial properties of the printed book cannot be understood separately from the text therein and that reading in itself is synesthetic, converting mostly visual stimulation into varied sensory imagination.

While throughout this paper I've argued that 4E narratology needs to take materiality seriously, I want to emphasize that this does not mean forgetting about language; in literature, both are inseparable and it is their joint effect that needs to be taken into account. As already illustrated with the sentence "There are bees up here", by expressing the same language in a different layout, the interpretation of that language is affected. Likewise, when a similar layout contains a different linguistic content, the semiotic dimension of the paratextual dimension changes as well. To demonstrate this, I will compare two fragments, one from *Grief* and one from *Lanny*, both in a diagonal composition, evoking entirely different meanings.

In *Grief*, when Dad remembers a story about wings, making love and an expression of a birdlike body, the three elements are printed as follows (G 36):

The wings.

The love.

Bird-like.

As a multimodal metaphor, the material and linguistic modalities simultaneously create impression of lightness, floating, and flying (a familiar metaphor for love).

In *Lanny* however, a similar text arrangement prompts a very different connection. One of the things Dead Papa Toothwort hears is (L 21):

Tom hasn't been at all well,

In this case, a different feeling presents itself. By connecting the textual message to the descent of the words, the passage evokes another familiar metaphor: things going south or downhill. Thus, these multimodal metaphors demonstrate how, once again, materiality and textuality cannot be examined in isolation, but always have a combined effect in meaning-making interactions.

Conclusion

I argued that, for 4E narratology to truly be enactivist, it needs to take up its commitment to materiality again, which will lead to a better understanding of how embodied readers make sense of narrative texts. Inspired by 4E's rich interdisciplinary tradition, I attempted to show the theoretical and methodological advantages of integrating ideas from materialist and multimodal studies into 4E theory. In this way, I hope to demonstrate how readers combine materially constituted texts with their own embodied memories to imagine narrative experiences. I found that sensory imagination, bodily resonance, and kinesthetic empathy all depend on various modalities, which need to be considered simultaneously.

Applying this framework to *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* and *Lanny* proved its worth. Both novels posit difficulties for traditional narratological approaches because of their experimental nature and their foregrounding of sensory experiences rather than narrative events. Moreover, their multimodality calls for a different analytical toolset than traditional 4E narratology employs. Relying on various theoretical and methodological insights from materialism, multimodality studies and 4E narratology allowed for a more complete understanding of the meaning-making interactions enabled by these novels.

The ways in which *Grief* and *Lanny* invite readers to imagine unfamiliar bodies, movements and perception can only fully be grasped by simultaneously accounting for textual and non-textual devices, such as linguistic structure, paragraph breaks or multimodal and synesthetic metaphors. By applying an integrated theory and methodology to examine the interplay between such devices, I demonstrated how semiotic modalities and embodied readers should always be considered together.

I hope I made a strong case for a 4E narratology that incorporates materiality. While this paper explored challenging narratives, I am convinced of the value this approach holds for all 4E analyses. It is only by taking the materiality of literature seriously that it can become truly 4E again.

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